

Ballads and Poems' Condemnation of Enclosure in Eighteenth Britain

R. Ganev¹

Historians have had a hard time finding evidence of opposition to enclosure and the loss of common right, partly due to the local nature of the process. Nevertheless, such opposition did exist, as scholars such as Jeanette Neeson have made clear. One way in which these changes to the land were opposed was through verse. Popular ballads, together with the poetry of peasant poets as well as mainstream poets such as Wordsworth, criticized the transformation of rural England using similar ideas and language. They argued that as a result of enclosure the peasantry were not only impoverished but socially marginalized, losing their sense of community. They also expressed sympathy for those who trespassed against the new enclosure laws. This evidence adds another dimension to historians' understanding of the enclosure debate.

In his discussion of enclosure in *The Country and City*, Raymond Williams associated pastoral poetry at the end of the eighteenth century with nostalgia: a celebration of the English countryside gave way to a fond remembrance of how good life used to be in the past, when land was more evenly divided.² We see something of this in the popular song "The Land."³ The first verse praises the richness and beauty of the land:

The land, the land, the rich and solid land.
The hills, and dales, and fields so grand
All fill'd with flowers, and fruits, and trees,
And back'd by rocks and surrounded by seas.

But in the last verse all this glory is associated with the past:

The fields were green, and ripe the corn,
On the summer's day when I was born;
The reapers reap'd, and the gleaners glean'd,
The harvest was rich, and no one complain'd.

A feeling of nostalgia is created both by the change of tense and reference to childhood. Significantly, readers are told that in the old days no one complained, either because all were prosperous enough to be content or because there was still amity between those who reaped or gleaned and those who farmed. Popular songs and poetry both celebrated the richness of the land and objected to the changes that were making access to it more difficult.

¹ University of Regina, Canada.

² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 46, 61-68.

³ "The Land," (n.p., n.d.), B.L., Shelfmark Hs 74 11250. There is a Catnach version, 1813-1838.

Here I will avoid better known poets and artists like Goldsmith and Gainsborough. I want to focus on material that was closer to peasants and agricultural labourers' point of view. One important example is the poetry of John Clare. John Barrell, Jeanette Neeson and Johanne Clare have all shown that John Clare, though avoiding the argument that enclosure impoverished the peasantry, took a strong stance against the enclosing class.⁴ This chapter seeks to add to this body of work by bringing into the discussion some popular songs and some less known poets.⁵ These were very definitely against the loss of access to commons and wastes. Like John Clare, they were outraged by the social cost of enclosure, but they also perceived its economic impact on the poor. Poets and song writers also tried to expose what they saw as the selfish motives of enclosers.

Songs and poems about enclosure and engrossment often blamed the gentry for enclosure, but they also blamed wealthy new farmers for the changes in landholding patterns. My criteria for including songs and poems in this paper has been whether they spoke directly about the economic and social meaning of access to the land and the loss of it, and whether they have been thoroughly analyzed by other historians and literary scholars. As in previous chapters, I have included anonymous broadside and chapbook ballads but also some verses written by the Bloomfield brothers, a few minor pastoral poets from the early nineteenth century and a poem by Wordsworth. It is curious how often the ballad genre was used to criticize loss of common right (both Nathaniel Bloomfield and Wordsworth employed it). It is also striking how similar the language is of these different kinds of verse and how similar the issues are that concerned both poets and popular ballad writers at the time.

Songs and poems made the economic argument, according to which enclosure impoverished the peasantry and enriched the gentry but they were equally concerned about the social cost, particularly the poor's loss of liberty, a home, a community, and an aesthetic experience. Poets and balladeers also expressed their opposition to enclosure through praise and sympathy for those who broke the post-enclosure laws.

The economic argument: enclosure makes the poor poorer

The economic importance of common right to peasants has been convincingly demonstrated by historians like the Hammonds, Jane Humphries, Keith Snell, E. P. Thompson and Jeanette Neeson. Despite contemporary arguments from supporters of enclosure that commons and wastes could only sustain poor

⁴ See Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 40 and John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 114-18. J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 284-5. Johanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 36-7.

⁵ Ian Dyck argues persuasively that Robert Bloomfield was against enclosure, though strictly speaking in "The Farmer's Boy" we see criticism of the new farmers and the loss of the chance to buy land rather than explicit reference to enclosure. Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 87. For John Clare and for Goldsmith see also Williams, *The Country and the City*, 136-7, 78.

breeds of animals and that commoning allowed for no agricultural improvements to be made, peasants' opposition to enclosure shows they found access to land to be very valuable.⁶ Jeanette Neeson in particular has illustrated the importance of wasteland commodities such as fuel, and plants for food, medicine, and manufacture to the household economy.⁷ In unenclosed areas access to the land helped sustain poor people from squatters to small farmers.

Songs and poems frequently referred to the economic significance of customary practices like gathering and gleaning. Gathering was seen as part of a peasant way of life and a source of extra income, usually for the poorest segment of rural society. The Cornish peasant-poet Henry Quick recalled gathering broom with his mother, which they bound and sold.⁸ A similar experience of a poor single parent was described by the poet William Holloway in the story of poor Susan and her son who could eke out a living before enclosure by gleaning, fishing in the river, and weaving baskets. Of course after enclosure they are evicted and their little hut is deserted.⁹ The farmer Nathaniel Dale's memory of gathering mushrooms as a boy to sell at the market and his depiction of female farm servants gathering wild strawberries from the meadows in his poem "My Favorite Girls" show that farmers also found such activities beneficial.¹⁰ Aside from food and commodities for sale, the rural poor's dependence on fuel from the common was also noted by Holloway:

The common, clad with vegetative gold,
Whose well-dried stores allay the wintry cold;
Whence ev'ry family its portion claims,

⁶ Hammond, J. L. and Barbara Hammond. *The Village Labourer, 1760-1832: A Study in the Government of England before the Reform Bill* (London: Longman's Green, 1980), 39. For the argument that commons and wastes only sustained unhealthy and weak animals see Andrew Pringle, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Westmoreland* (Edinburgh, 1794), 16, Jacob Malcolm, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Buckingham* (London, 1794), 36, and William Harris, *On the Present Distress of the Country and Suitable Remedies* (London, 1816), 110. Jacob Malcolm argued that the right of commonage and herbage were not worth having and that no more than one in ten made use of the right, but he used ten times what he had a right to thus injuring his neighbours. Enclosure would remove this injustice. William Harris agreed that those who had access to commons and wastes were poorer than those who lived in enclosed areas: "It is a matter of universal experience, that the population in the neighbourhood of those wastes, is at once the most wretched and mischievous which the country any where exhibits. Even the cattle are a stunted and degenerate race."

⁷ Barry Reay, *Popular Culture in England 1550-1750* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 173. See also Neeson, *Commoners*, Chapter 6. Cobbett as cited in Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, 109. Cobbett thought access to the land was of great necessity if one hoped to be self-sufficient and proposed allotment schemes for the poor.

⁸ Henry Quick, *The Life and Progress of Henry Quick, of Zennor, Written by Himself*, ed. P.A.S.Pool, (1844).

⁹ Holloway, *The Peasant's Fate*, Part II (1802).

¹⁰ Nathaniel Dale, *The Eventful Life of Nathaniel Dale, with Recollections & Anecdotes Containing a Great Variety of Business Matters, &c., as Occurred in the Life of the Author* (n.p., Printed for the author, n.d.), 11, 88. From the story it appears that Dale's life as farmer began around 1840. In the poem the farm girls are gathering wild strawberries on behalf of the whole farm rather than for themselves.

To fence the hovel, or recruit the flames...¹¹

In songs, the gatherer is usually an attractive young woman or little girl, probably in order to arouse the pity or sympathy of the audience but also illustrating Jane Humphries' argument that the wasteland had a special significance for women.¹² Some of these heroines suggest the ideology of the picturesque, according to which poverty and ragged clothing were seen as somehow romantic and appealing.¹³ The songs "Lilies and Roses" and "Helen the Fair" seem to belong to this genre.¹⁴

Gleaning also carried ideas of the picturesque with it, perhaps more so than gathering, which is why it more often found a place in polite art (Gainsborough painted his wife as a gleaner, for instance). Its depiction in popular ballads and pastoral poems, however, often suggested its economic significance. Though assumed to be the right of the poor, it could be of use to anyone who had fallen on hard times. The Rev. W. Huntington remembered how when he was not earning enough to make ends meet, his wife went gleaning to supplement their diet, but farmers drove her out of the fields as did other gleaners, saying that a parson's wife should not glean (presumably because she was well-off). She persevered and kept gleaning. This was before the court ruling that decided gleaning was not a universal right under common law.¹⁵ Things had changed by 1812 when a pamphleteer lamented the loss of gleaning rights:

It has been legally determined, not long ago, that no one has any right to glean in any field without the owner's permission! Poor Beggars! You have got the strait Jacket on at the last: there will soon be nothing you can call your own but air and water!¹⁶

On this issue we see a slight difference in emphasis between popular ballads and pastoral poems. Though written (or at least printed) at the same time,

¹¹ Holloway, *The Peasant's Fate* Part I (1802).

¹² See Jane Humphries, "Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Economic History* 50, no. 1 (1990): 35-41.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the ideology of the picturesque see Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 63-85.

¹⁴ "Lillies and Roses. A Favourite Song" (London: J. Jennings, 1790-1840), Bodleian Library, Harding B25(1109) and "Helen the Fair" (London: J. Pitts, 1819-44), Bodleian Library, Harding B11(237A).

¹⁵ Rev. W. Huntington, *The Sinner Jaded; Or Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. W. Huntington, The Coal Heaver, Late Minister of Providence Chapel* (London, n.d.), 16. Huntington was born in 1774. For the court decision against gleaning in 1788 see Peter King, "The Origins of the Gleaning Judgement of 1788: A Case Study of Legal Change, Customary Right and Social Conflict in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Law and History Review*, 10, no. 1 (Spring, 1992): 1.

¹⁶ Anon., *The Beggar's Complaint, against Rack-Rent Landlords, Corn Factors, Great Farmers, Monopolizers, Paper Money Makers, and War, and Many Other Oppressions. By One who Pities the Oppressed.* (Sheffield, 1812), 22.

popular ballads contained a greater sense of entitlement to gleaning than pastoral poems.¹⁷ In songs, gleaning was often taken for granted:

See, content the humble gleaners,
Take the fetter'd ears that fall,
Nature all her children viewing,
Kindly bounteous cares for all.¹⁸

The song suggests gleaning was a matter of course, a natural activity, rather than a kindness that a landlord allows the peasants. Interestingly in this song the gleaner is male, in contrast to the numerous female gleaners found in other songs, as well as in polite art. In "The Cottager's Daughter" Mary helps her father (a cottager who lives off the produce of his cottage) by gleaning. Again, this custom is presented as a matter of course.¹⁹ Despite the 1788 ruling, in many regions small farmers and commoners continued to glean, so the popular songs may have had a more accurate understanding of the practice than pastoral poets and pamphleteers who regretted its loss.

In contrast, pastoral poems showed a greater awareness of the disputes surrounding gleaning and often saw gleaning as a privilege that kind and paternal landlords should allow the poor, rather than a right. In the following verses the narrator urges landlords to allow gleaning and pity the poor:

Rake not the Land, (the Peasant cries)
Touch not the scatter'd Ear;
Can Gratitude with such supplies,
Refuse the Gleaner's share?

No, rather let your pity leave
Some straggling spikes behind;
Who that with generous heart can give,
A comfort fails to find?²⁰

To whom are these words addressed? Very likely to the landowner of the fields, or the capitalist farmer for whom the "peasant" works. The fact that the landlord needs this reminder suggests that gleaning is no longer taken for granted by everyone.

This belief in the economic usefulness of gathering and gleaning makes logical the conviction, shared by most poets and song writers, that enclosure further impoverished the poor. Other contemporary sources spoke of economic dependence rather than outright impoverishment. According to one observer,

¹⁷ Pamphleteers who regretted the loss of gleaning rights also may have had a more strict interpretation of the law than songs. Despite the 1788 ruling, gleaners continued to glean in many areas. Peter King, "The Origins of the Gleaning Judgement of 1788," 2-3.

¹⁸ "The Gleaners," *Beauties of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1802), L.C. 2836.

¹⁹ "The Cottager's Daughter" (London: J. Catnach, 1814-42), B.L. rb.m.93.

²⁰ Peter Sherston, Esq., *The Months, Commencing with Early Spring; A Poem Descriptive of Rural Scenes and Village Characters* (Bath, 1809). See also D. Hurn, "August," in *Rural Rhymes; Or, a Collection of Epistolary, Humorous, and Descriptive Pieces* (Spalding, 1813). Hurn criticizes farmers for restricting gleaning.

enclosure and engrossment caused small farmers to become day-labourers, day-labourers to become beggars, and beggars to grow in misery and in number (while farmers were “elevated above their proper level.”)²¹ Though they disagreed on whether this was a good thing or not, most commentators agreed that enclosure and engrossment caused agricultural labourers to become more dependent on the wage.²² Thus songs and poems’ argument that loss of access to land caused poverty would have resonated with other contemporary writings.

Songs against enclosure were rare, as Roy Palmer has already observed, in part due to the local nature of opposition.²³ Johanne Clare has pointed out that the enclosure elegies were John Clare’s most local poems.²⁴ Because most of the popular ballads that have been preserved were printed in printing centres like London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, many anti-enclosure songs may be lost or buried in local archives. But enclosure was never popular among the poor and there is a ballad tradition linking enclosure to poverty that probably goes back to the sixteenth century. The old ballad of Thomas Hickathrift found in the Pepys penny dreadful collection tells the story of a hero who kills a giant and confiscates his land to provide commons for the poor.²⁵ We find more direct and explicit complaints against enclosure in songs that criticized social conditions. An old song from the Roxburghe collection about corruption and various social ills contains the following verse:

There be many rich men,
Both Yeomen and Gentry,
That for their owne private gaine,
Hurt a whole Countrey
By closing free Commons;
Yet they’le make as though
‘Twere for common good,

²¹ David Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry* (1795, Reprinted Fairfield: Augustus M. Kelly, 1977), 103. This can also be seen as a statement about how engrossment impoverishes. Davies is speaking of engrossment here. For the contemporary debate about Parliamentary enclosure see Neeson, *Commoners*, 18-52.

²² For loss of independence see also J.M. Neeson, “English Enclosures and British Peasants: Current Debates about Rural Social Structure in Britain c. 1750-1870,” *Jahrbuch fur Wirtschafts Geschichte* 22, no. 2 (2000), 26. Neeson argues that while an independent peasantry survived longer in pastoral areas, there was still a lot of enclosure in the north and west which had damaging consequences. See also her *Commoners*, 34-5, 39, 178, for commoners independence before enclosure and loss of it after.

²³ Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1988), 41. Palmer is only aware of one ballad specifically written against country enclosure from a 1753 manuscript. There are several ballads opposing town enclosures as well as references to enclosure in ballads on other subjects. Most ballads in print on town enclosures seem to be from the early 1800s.

Neeson, *Commoners*, 286. Also, commoners only resisted enclosure when they thought they had a chance to succeed, which further complicates finding evidence of protest. Neeson, *Commoners*, 260. For the local nature of custom see Andy Wood, “The Place of Custom in Plebeian Political Culture: England, 1550-1800,” *Social History* 22, no. 1 (1997): 49.

²⁴ Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, 36.

²⁵ “The Pleasant History of Thomas Hic-ka-thrift,” in Samuel Pepys, *Chapbooks, Penny Merriments*, vol. 1, no. 3. Cited in Reay, *Popular Culture in England*, 53.

But I know what I know.²⁶

Such songs do not tell us whether enclosure actually caused poverty, whether this was how it was seen by the peasantry, or whether song-writers who opposed enclosure felt they might make a more convincing case against it by depicting it as the cause of such extreme suffering as starvation and homelessness. They do however tell us that a connection between enclosure and poverty existed in the minds of ballad writers and their audience.

The economic argument against enclosure continued to be made at the end of the eighteenth century. The ballad about the enclosure of Nun's Green, discussed in more detail below, was written in the 1790s, and it too associated lack of access to commons with poverty. The two following songs, both printed in numerous versions around 1800 and frequently found in histories of enclosure, speak of the loss of pasture for one's animals:

In old times I have heard 'tis true,
That a poor man kept a pig and a cow,
Their commons and places to feed them on,
That a poor man might live happy then,
But now they are all taken in,
And the rich do reap the gain,
Workhouses and gaols then they have made,
And to send them there is quite a trade.²⁷

In "My Old Hat" the same point is made:

In former times it was not so,
For this was all the due,
The poor to have both milk and woo'
When my old hat was new.

When the Romans liv'd in our land,
These commons they did give,
Unto the poor for charity,
To help them for to live:
They've ta'en from them their proper right
Which makes them for to rue,
Although the same to them belong'd,
When my old hat was new.²⁸

The loss of milk as part of the diet as well as the loss of a little bit of extra income through the wool of a sheep that could be kept on the common are regretted

²⁶ "Come, buy this new Ballad, before you doe goe: If you raile at the Author, I know what I know. To the Tune of Ile tell you but so," *Roxburghe Ballads*, 157-60.

²⁷ "A New Song on the Times" (London: J. Pitts, 1819-1844) in Roy Palmer, *A Ballad History of England from 1588 to the Present Day* (London, 1979), 94.

²⁸ "Luckidad's Garland," *Luckidad's Garland; or, When my Old Hat was New* (n.p., n.d.), L.C. 2846. Another version was printed in Liverpool by W. Armstrong, Bodleian Library, Harding B 28 (56).

here. The song seeks to legitimize common right by tracing its origins to Roman antiquity.

The poet James Templeman agreed that enclosure and engrossment brought poverty, though he focused more on the high prices of provisions that could result from it. The engrossing activities of his hero, the selfish farmer Hobson, cause the disappearance of the small farmer from his lands and give him complete control over all the grain, allowing him to jack up the price and make a huge profit at the expense of the poor. The guilty party here is not the gentry, but the large capitalist farmer, Hobson, who, we learn later in the poem, eagerly annexes more and more fields to his already large holdings.²⁹ For the poet Samuel Jackson Pratt, enclosure and engrossment impoverished cottagers. He describes impoverished villages, “haggard shapes” and “spectres thin of hollow penury”.³⁰

The economic argument extended not only to the effects of enclosure but also to the motivations of enclosers. Ballad writers and poets concerned with this problem refused to grant enclosers their claim that they were acting in the national interest.³¹ The major motive, in their view, was avarice.³² Nathaniel Bloomfield blamed gentlemen’s avarice for enclosures that converted pasture to arable, causing shepherds to lose their employment, and increasing the gap between rich and poor. “Great men’s” greed and lack of charity in regards to this matter are seen as a neglect of duty in the popular ballad “The cries of the poor against the oppression of the rich &c:”

It is the duty of great men
Poor people to defend
But worldly interest moves them more,
They mind no other end.

The process described here is engrossment rather than enclosure. Though we know engrossment might follow or precede enclosure, the former was more often and more explicitly denounced in poetry and in popular songs. Adding farm to farm was seen as a particularly selfish thing to do:

Woe to them that addeth house to house,

²⁹ James Templeman, “Farmer Hobson, a rural poem” in his *Poems and Tales*, vol. 1 (London, 1809):

And here, no little farmer needy stands,
Oblig’d to sell his corn from off his lands
But several farms that many serv’d before,
Now all in one, increase the rich man’s store;
Who, with a moderate profit not content,
Keeps up the price, and makes the poor lament.

³⁰ Samuel Jackson Pratt, *Cottage-Pictures; Or, the Poor: A Poem*, Part I (London, 1803), 19.

³¹ For the argument that enclosure was in the national interest see Neeson, *Commoners*, 42-6.

³² The Roxburghe ballad discussed above (see fn 31) clearly expressed skepticism that enclosure was done for the common good:

Yet they’le make as though
‘Twere for common good,
But I know what I know.

And addeth field to field,
This dreadful curse he cannot miss
For they deserve it well.
There's many lairds within this land,
Of judgement have no fear,
If cattle with them pasture have,
The meal it is so dear.³³

This song was written at the end of the seventeenth century, when meat prices were higher than grain prices and the last two lines are probably an allusion to the conversion of arable to pasture, a process that was reversed, causing similar poetic outrage, at the end of the eighteenth century.³⁴ In contrast to the previous verse, this time the lairds engross for profit, rather than pleasure. The song condemns both kinds of enclosure and ends with curses of the enclosing lords and lairds. Such curses, found in some ballads and also in Wordsworth's "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," may have to do with the peasant tradition of cursing enclosure described by Keith Thomas.³⁵

*Though engrossment was a process that had been in place for a long time, it was always seen as a "new" evil in poetry, perhaps because it was so often shaped by local experience:

When five acres they did rent, then money they could save,
But now for to support their pride, five hundred they must have,
If these great farms were taken and divided into three;
That we might see as happy days, as ever we see.³⁶

In a way this is the complaint against large farmers already familiar to us, but it is more specifically about large chunks of land being controlled by one person. The impetus behind adding more and more to one's holdings is said to be a sign of pride and greed and the solutions to this lie in dividing the land into smaller holdings that can be shared by more farmers and benefit more people. It is curious that the writer of this song decided the 500 acres should be divided into three, thus suggesting that 160 acres is an acceptable size for a farm while 500 acres indicates greed. I suspect this was done more for the sake of the rhyme scheme than to suggest how large a farm could be without being a problem.

The social cost: the loss of community

Historians have demonstrated that access to land had a social and cultural significance, perhaps greater than its economic significance. The common and wasteland were part of a culture of gift-exchange and neighbourliness, shaping the life of the community in important ways.³⁷ Loss of custom could involve loss

³³ "The cries of the poor against the oppression of the rich &c" (n.p., n.d.)

³⁴ For the conversion of arable to pasture in seventeenth-century enclosure see G. E. Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (London: MacMillan, 1968), 26.

³⁵ See Neeson, "English Enclosures and British Peasants," 20 on how large landowners provided the impetus to enclose. For the cursing of enclosers see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 570.

³⁶ "Times Altered or, the Grumbling Farmers," (n.d., n.p.), B.L., HS 74 1250.

³⁷ See Neeson, *Commoners*, 159-171, 179 ff.

of a sense of self, community and history.³⁸ This theme is particularly salient in the work of John Clare. According to Johanne Clare, John Clare eschewed a focus on the economic loss caused by enclosure, because his relationship with the land transcended economic concerns. His criticism of the enclosing class was based on their obsession with economic gain and he preferred to emphasize instead the loss of happiness and freedom.³⁹ Many other poetic endeavours showed that the idea of the land evoked a rich array of associations. Its loss could mean the loss of social mobility, of freedom, of a home, a playground, a place of beauty and artistic inspiration for the poor.

The disappearance of small farms could have unfortunate consequences for the peasantry's social mobility.⁴⁰ The timing and the effects of the disappearance of small holders is still debated among historians.⁴¹ Contemporaries also disagreed about the effects of enclosure on small farmers, but many of them thought they were pernicious.⁴² The victims of enclosure and engrossment in popular songs were often small farmers as well as landless or land poor commoners and the anger against new-fashioned farmers and engrossment (see above) in late eighteenth-century ballads certainly suggests small farms were on the wane.⁴³ When no small farms were available for purchase or rental, it meant a peasant or agricultural labourer had little chance of improving his lot. The contemporary writer on agriculture, David Davies, felt social mobility was very important to the happiness of the peasantry, this most "useful class of men." He argued they should be encouraged to improve their social condition, should have some land and hope to get more.⁴⁴ That the new pattern of land-ownership made this difficult was one of the worries of Robert Bloomfield:

³⁸ See Wood, "The Place of Custom in Plebeian Political Culture," 51-2.

³⁹ Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, 36-7.

⁴⁰ Neeson, argues enclosure ended upward mobility for small farmers and peasants by making land too expensive to buy. Neeson, "English Enclosures and British Peasants," 21. Also J. V. Beckett, "The Disappearance of the Cottager and the Squatter from the English Countryside: The Hammonds Revisited," in B.A. Holderness and Michael Turner, eds., *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920* (London: The Humbledon Press, 1991), 65-6.

⁴¹ Beckett argues enclosure caused the disappearance of small holders, Beckett, "The Disappearance of the Cottager and the Squatter," 64. Mick Reed thinks enclosure was bad for labour but not necessarily for small farmers. See Mick Reed, "Class and Conflict in Rural England: Some Reflections on a Debate," in Reed and Wells, eds., *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 6. Roger Wells disagrees, saying the size of farms in the main corn lands increased markedly in the eighteenth century. Roger Wells, "The Development of the English Rural Proletariat, 1700-1850," in Wells and Reed, 29-53. The material used in this chapter obviously lends support to Wells's position.

⁴² John Howlett, Appendix to *Dispersion of the Gloomy Apprehensions, of Late Repeatedly Suggested from the Decline of our Corn-Trade, &c.* (London, 1797). Howlett talked about high rents' negative effect on small farmers' ability to compete with large ones: they could not produce a large enough quantity to meet the growing expenses.

⁴³ For a discussion of the historiographic debate surrounding this issue see Neeson, "English Enclosures and British Peasants," 18-21. For the decline of the small subsistence farmer see also Neeson, *Commoners*, 223-254.

⁴⁴ Thomas Marsters also argued that, because of engrossment, there would not be enough farms for everyone who wanted to buy them. It is important to remember that Marsters thought enclosure was good, as long as it ensured the prevalence of many small farms rather than few

The hope of humble industry is o'er;
The blameless hope, the cheering sweet presage
Of future comforts for declining age.
Can my sons share from this paternal hand
The profit with the labours of the land?
No, though indulgent Heaven its blessing deigns,
Where's the small farm to suit my scanty means?⁴⁵

The land could be a home both in a narrow sense and in the larger sense of a community to which one belonged. For Robert Bloomfield, the fields were a home while he was working as a farmer's boy. A loving attachment to the earth and its produce is expressed in the poem "The Farmer's Boy." The popularity of his poem shows that it resonated with a widespread view of the peasantry. The farmer's boy, Giles, revels in the contact with the soil as he works with the harrow and then sits on the bank to rest:

His heels deep sinking every step he goes,
Till dirt adhesive loads his clouted shoes,
Welcome green headland! Firm beneath his feet;
Welcome the friendly bank's refreshing seat!⁴⁶

Giles is compelled to make a home in the field when he works as a bird scarer because of the cold. He makes a little hut for himself where he can light a fire and warm himself. In the case of squatters the fields provided a home in a much more literal sense. Ballads about gypsies made this point: "Let the lord boast his castle, the baron his hall;/But the home of the Gipsies is widest of all."⁴⁷

The loss of community experienced after enclosure has been well documented. Contemporaries feared that the decline of small farmers would create a shortage of "honest and industrious" farm servants who usually came from such families, and that poor parish children would have fewer employment opportunities (also provided largely by small farmers.)⁴⁸ Further damage to rural communities would be caused by the loss of rural pleasures and sports. John Blackner's description of the enclosure of Shenton common illustrates this grievance. Shenton common was the spot where village entertainments and sports were held and it was enclosed and ploughed up in 1797:

This spot, so long sacred to rural amusements, on inclosing the lordship of Shenton, was ploughed up, on the 27th of February, 1797. A spot of earth, comprehending about 324 square yards, sanctified by the lapse of

big ones. He saw engrossment as a separate process from enclosure that did not necessarily have to follow enclosure. Marsters, *A View of Agricultural Oppressions*, (1798), 70.

⁴⁵ Robert Bloomfield, "The Farmer's Boy," 40.

⁴⁶ Robert Bloomfield, "The Farmer's Boy," 7.

⁴⁷ "The Gipsy's Tent" (Durham: G. Walker, 1797-1834), Bodleian Library, Harding B 11(175). See also "The Gipsy Queen" (London: J. Pitts, 1819-1844), Bodleian Library, Harding B11(3990).

⁴⁸ Mr. Curwen, *Thoughts on the Present Depressed State of the Agricultural Interest of this Kingdom; and on the Rapid Increase of the Poor Rates* (London, 1817), 7.

centuries, as a place of rustic sport...Here the youth of Nottingham were wont to give facility to the circulation of their blood, strength of to their limbs, and elasticity to their joints, but callous hearted avarice has robbed them of the spot.⁴⁹

Thomas Whitby's hero, James, experiences both, the loss of home and the loss of a communal pastime when he is expelled from his cottage so that a mansion can be built in its place, its grounds also taking up the spot previously used for village sports.⁵⁰

According to poets, enclosure could cause even greater damage to rural communities through the depopulation of villages. It is by no means certain that this was the effect of enclosure and some contemporaries even argued that the population might increase as a result.⁵¹ Historians have also argued that depopulation did not necessarily go hand in hand with enclosure in the eighteenth century but poets persisted in using depopulation to create an emotional effect:

But now the sledge, the file, no more resounds;
No more the ploughboy, from the neighb'ring grounds
At evening, trudges with the blunted share,
Or broken traces to receive repair.
Poor, stumbling Ball (it) no more shall thither plod,
And dozing wait, in patience, to be shod.
In fertile lawn, of idly-pamper'd steeds,
A useless race, for false ambition, breeds.
The fallow lands, where cheerful peasants earn'd
Their weekly bread, to proud plantations turn'd,
Forget to yield their auburn crops of grain,
That fill'd the petty farmers's early wain,
When, on his ambling nag, he took his round,

⁴⁹ John Blackner, *The History of Nottingham, Embracing its Antiquities, Trade and Manufactures, from the Earliest Authentic Records, to the Present Period* (Nottingham, 1815), 36.

⁵⁰ Thomas Whitby, *Retrospection: a Rural Poem*, Canto II (London, 1820). See also N. Bloomfield, "Elegy on the Enclosure of Honington Green" in *Elegy on the Enclosure of Honington Green and other Poems* (London, 1798), verse 6, ff, verse 13. For an account of the impact of enclosure on rural recreation see Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 107-10. Malcolmson argues that "By the middle of the nineteenth century any kind of open space for recreation was very much at a premium."

⁵¹ See Pringle, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Westmoreland* (1794), 16. See also Rennie, Brown, & Shirreff, *General View of the Agriculture of the West Riding of Yorkshire* (Edinburgh, 1799), 19. These authors thought that the newly enclosed farms would require a lot of labour which would increase the number of agricultural labourers in the area. Also Malcolm, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Buckingham* (1794), 27. For the argument that enclosure caused an increase in the labour supply in agriculture see G. E. Mingay, *Parliamentary Enclosure in England: An Introduction to its Causes, Incidence and Impact 1750-1850* (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 142 and J. D. Chambers, "Enclosure and the Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution," *Economic History Review* 5, no. 3 (1953): 323. For the opposite argument see N. F. R. Crafts, "Enclosure and Labour Supply Revisited," *Explorations in Economic History* 15, no. 2 (1978): 182.

With flaggon to the tatter'd saddle bound,
Replenish'd well with hearty home-brew'd ale,
The toil-contending reapers to regale.⁵²

So wrote the poet William Holloway. The peasants as well as the rural artisans are forced to leave their native land after the local landlord encloses the area for his own private amusements. The contrast between an idle gentry and an industrious peasantry is parallel to a contrast between hard-working horses like Ball and "idly-pamper'd steeds," used only to serve pleasure and "false ambition." Holloway's use of the term 'useless race' could denote both the useless breed of horses and the idle ruling class. It is applied again later in the poem to the deer roaming the newly enclosed parks replacing the "rich corn-fields." The argument for enclosure as increasing productivity is undermined by this picture of productive fields and a happy, industrious peasantry before enclosure, followed by "proud plantations" that yield no crop and sustain no small farmers. The loss of land access drives small farmers to the cities:

Now into one a hundred fields are thrown,
Their tenants banish'd, and their pleasure flown!
To crowded towns, the poor mechanic strays,
To spend the sickly evening of his days.⁵³

Eviction is also described in the song "When my Old Hat was New," discussed above. The earliest version of it I could find comes from 1820-1824. The Lauriston Castle version, which is undated, contains the following lines:

The cot-houses are all thrown down,
The commons ta'n away,
Their sheep and kine they must remove
No longer there to stay.⁵⁴

The loss of land did not always mean the loss of home, but it nearly always seems to have meant a loss of beauty to poets. For John Clare enclosure was destructive of natural beauty and harmony and he used the images of dying birds and starving animals to make his point.⁵⁵ The irregularity of the commons provided greater scope for the poetic imagination. Thus the nostalgia of John Blackner: "[the common] by the curiosity of its shape, and by the magic raptures which the sight of it awakened in our fancies of the existence of happier times" was for him a fond memory.⁵⁶ In Nathaniel Bloomfield's poem, through enclosure the aesthetic experience is transferred from the poor to the gentry, whose notions of refinement and taste lead them to create vast pleasure grounds. The poor labourer may no longer walk and sit on the green grass but must walk upon roads of gravel and stones whose monotony "Fatigues both the eye and the

⁵² Holloway, *The Peasant's Fate* (1802), 32-3. For the debate about whether enclosure depopulated see Neeson, *Commoners*, 39.

⁵³ Holloway, *The Peasant's Fate* (1802), 33.

⁵⁴ "Luckidad's Garland," *Luckidad's Garland; or, When my Old Hat was New* (n.p., n.d.), L.C. 2846.

⁵⁵ Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, 43.

⁵⁶ Blackner, *The History of Nottingham* (1815), 36.

feet.”⁵⁷ He may no longer enjoy the wild flowers (which Bloomfield prefers to the genteel flowers of the enclosed fields).⁵⁸

One’s relationship with the land also had implications for one’s relationship with one’s nation. The belief that having claim on some land made one a more patriotic citizen was reflected in the franchise and was often voiced by contemporaries:

It is plainly agreeable to sound policy that as many individuals as possible in a state should possess an interest in the soil; because this attaches them strongly to the country and its constitution, and makes them zealous and resolute in defending them.⁵⁹

Although there were those who felt access to land had a negative impact on the morals of the poor, making them lazy and insolent,⁶⁰ others argued the beneficiaries of allotment schemes worked very hard on their land and tried to save for hard times. Crime in such parishes, according to these commentators, decreased significantly, illustrating the ennobling effect of cultivation. Ownership or at least some measure of control over land made men work harder and care for it more.⁶¹ Giving the poor some freedom through land was the best way of ensuring success for charity:

one of the best species of charity is that which enables the poor man to exert with effects, and with honest freedom, that strength, and those faculties, which Providence has blessed him with, for the benefit and support of his family.⁶²

Thus a close relationship with the land improved the national character. This idea allowed poets and song writers to argue that enclosure and the loss of custom represented a betrayal not only of the peasantry but of the values of the whole nation.⁶³ Andy Wood’s argument that disputes over custom politicized the poor and that the language of custom was used during plebeian protest after 1790, further suggests that claims to land had an ideological importance in popular culture.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ N. Bloomfield, “Elegy on the Enclosure of Honington Green,” verse 4.

⁵⁸ N. Bloomfield, “Elegy on the Enclosure of Honington Green,” verse 14, verse 5.

⁵⁹ Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry* (1795), 56.

⁶⁰ One contemporary who argued in this vein was John Billingsley, quoted by the Hammonds, *The Village Labourer*, 37, as saying that common right made peasants too proud and gave them a sense of independence which made them indolent and scornful of day labour.

⁶¹ See for example Pringle, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Westmoreland* (1794), 8. Arthur Young also proposed land allotments for the poor, Young, ed., *The Annals of Agriculture*, vol. 30 (London, 1770-1813), 52, Cited in Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 76.

⁶² Estcourt, *An Account of the Result of an Effort to Better the Condition of the Poor* (1804), 3-7. Another allotment proposal came from William Clarkson, but his idea only extended so far as to provide the poor with a vegetable garden and the chance to keep a cow. William Clarkson, Esq., *An Inquiry into the Cause of the Increase of Pauperism and Poor Rates; with a Remedy for the Same* (London, 1815), 56.

⁶³ Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, 39. The poet William Holloway saw enclosure as a betrayal of English values maintaining that “Albion mourns” such venal behaviour as depriving the poor of their cot and rendering the peasant “meanly dependent,” Holloway, *The Peasant’s Fate* (1802), 36.

⁶⁴ Wood, “The Place of Custom in Plebeian Political Culture,” 58.

In this context it is significant that by far the most overwhelming non-economic argument against enclosure expressed in verse was the argument that the loss of access was the loss of liberty. Songs about gypsies associated life on the land with a romantic view of man's communion with nature and freedom. In the words of the Gipsy Queen

And where is there a Queen like me,
That can revel upon the green,
In boundless liberty.⁶⁵

Liberty is also the central theme of the extraordinary ballad "The Lament of Nun's Green." According to the collector who published the ballad, Nun's Green consisted of 50 acres and was used by the inhabitants of Derby who had right of common on it. Part of it was sold in 1768 and the rest in 1791 for the purpose of building houses for the city. This provoked a lot of protest in the form of petitions, pamphlets and ballads, but the enclosure could not be stopped. The introduction to the ballad says the following of Nun's Green:

Who after upwards of 460 years (being a great and good Gift, by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and Earl of Leicester) was tried, cast and condemned, on the 14th of February, 1791, for being serviceable to the Poor People of this Town, as well as a Stranger, but a great Eye Sore to some particular Gentleman; but the Execution is left till the Pleasure of Parliament be known.

The ballad appeared as a broadside with a woodcut of a man being led to execution. It was written from the point of view of a piece of land, which is given a human voice. But the one condemned turns out to have a double identity: it is both the land and the goddess of liberty who stands for the land—Liberty and the land are one and the same as the words of Liberty are also the story of Nun's Green.⁶⁶

I have liv'd here, Four Hundred and Sixty Years;
Was station'd here by Glorious John of Gaunt,
Who never thought the poor should ever want...

The enclosers, identified as "gentlemen" are called "tyrants". Liberty, or Nun's Green, expresses fear that

My other Sisters soon, must fall a Prey
To those who falsely take my Life away.

⁶⁵ "The Gipsy Queen" (London: J. Pitts, 1819-1844), Bodleian Library, Harding B11(3990).

⁶⁶ This ballad is very similar to John Clare's "The Lament of Swordy Well," where the land is also made to speak and its enclosure is seen as a loss of liberty for the poor:

There was a time my bit of ground
Made freeman of the slave,
The ass no pounder'd dare to pound
When I his supper gave.

"The Lament of Swordy Well," J. W. Tibble, ed., *The Poems of John Clare*, vol. 1 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1935).

This suggests an awareness of the greater damage enclosure was doing to the nation and the poor, a fear that access to land might be thoroughly eradicated.

For Nathaniel Bloomfield the enclosure of Honington Green also meant a loss of freedom. It is not possible for villagers to enjoy enclosed grounds in the same way because one has always to be afraid that the “owner’s dread voice” would shout “You’ve no business here:”

While the Green, tho’ but Daisies it’s boast,
Was free as the Flow’rs to the Bee;
In all seasons the Green we lov’d most,
Because on the Green we were free;
‘Twas the prospect that first met my eyes,
And Memory still blesses the scene;
For early my heart learnt to prize
The Freedom of Honington Green.⁶⁷

Bloomfield ends the poem by speculating that future generations would not miss the common because they would have never experienced it in the first place. But this did not mean that their quality of life would not be affected:

The Youths of a more polish’d Age
Shall not wish these rude Commons to see;
To the Birds that’s inur’d to the Cage,
It would not be Bliss to be free.⁶⁸

For William Holloway the problem was independence, but he emphasized not so much economic dependence as the loss of freedom. The purpose of his poem (as stated by himself) is to show how the engrossing of small farms hurts the peasantry, how small occupiers are driven to desperate solutions such as embracing a military life or “being reduced to the most abject state of dependence, and submitting to the galling hardship of becoming *servants* on the spot where they once had been masters.”⁶⁹ He deals with this issue through the story of the small farmer Reuben who uses the commons to graze his “two fair fac’d cows” and lives happily with his wife on what they produced. However, the wicked landlord encloses the land, forcing Reuben to live in servitude and breaking his independent spirit. Displaced from the life he loves Reuben ends up joining the army.

Thus enclosers who deprived the peasantry of liberty were cast in the role of oppressors. In many songs and poems we hear the somewhat mysterious tidings that “oppression” forced the peasant from his cot. We are not told whether this was due to enclosure or engrossment or whether some other reason was used to bring about an eviction, but a sense of injustice was emphatic. Thus in David Service’s poem “The Caledonian Herd-Boy” the David’s father is tricked out of his large property by “fraud” and is reduced to a cot and a little farm, which results in

⁶⁷ N. Bloomfield, “Elegy on the Enclosure of Honington Green,” verses 14 and 15.

⁶⁸ N. Bloomfield, “Elegy on the Enclosure of Honington Green,” verse 22.

⁶⁹ Holloway, Preface to *The Peasant’s Fate*, (1802).

David having to work as a herd-boy.⁷⁰ In “The Beggar’s Petition” we hear this familiar story:

A little farm was my paternal lot,
Then, like the lark, I sprightly hail’d the morn.
But ah! Oppression forc’d me from my cot,
My cattle dy’d, and blighted was my corn.⁷¹

A real-life version of the story can shed some light on this theme. In 1785, due to improvements in husbandry, small farms were engrossed, among them that of Mr. Johnston. He was moved to a cottage with two acres owned by the landlord Erick, who had evicted him in the first place. In 1792 Erick evicted the family from the cottage but Mr. Johnston refuses to move, vowing to live and die there: “He died on 22nd December, 1792, and found peace and shelter from lairds and greedy tackmen in the grave”. Meditating on his father’s story William Johnston reflected: “...we should not be oppressive to our poorer neighbours, nor use the power we have over them for their injury. Both rich and poor must leave all they have in this world, and be no more seen.”⁷² The issue here was engrossment and eviction, rather than enclosure, but the end result of landlessness was seen as catastrophic for one who had lived off the land his whole life.

Songs’ sympathy for law-breakers trespassing on enclosed land

The loss of customary rights received much criticism in some contemporary pamphlets. An anonymous pamphleteer of 1812 wrote angrily about the restriction of nutting rights, which he saw as another shameful step in depriving the poor of the use of the land. He also mentioned the forbidding of hunting and fishing.⁷³ Punishments for not observing the new rules could be harsh. Ribton-Turner recorded a case of six women in Gloucestershire in 1800 being stripped to the waist and beaten at the whipping post in front of Town Hall till bloody for “hedge pulling.” This was part of a general trend to include gathering offences like the breaking of fences for fuel under vagrancy legislation.⁷⁴ The destitution of offenders, as well as the harshness of the punishments could often gain a measure of support or sympathy for law breakers among poets and song writers. The song “Wandering Mary” describes a poor single mother who is driven to steal hawberries from hedges. “No thief am I, as some allege” she insists, partly because she is driven to this act by want, but partly invoking the lost custom that allowed the poor to use what nature had to offer.⁷⁵

Because fuel became so much more expensive for the poor, hedge-breaking in winter excited particular pity, and the young Wordsworth gave expression to it in his “Goody Blake and Harry Gill.” Wordsworth employed the ballad form, as

⁷⁰ David Service, *The Caledonian Herd-Boy; A Rural Poem* (Yarmouth, J.D. Downes, 1802), 3.

⁷¹ “The Beggar’s Petition” (n.p., n.d.), B.L., Shelfmark 11621.c.10.

⁷² William Johnston, *The Life and Times of William Johnston, Horticultural Chemist, Gardener, and Cartwright*, ed. Reginald Alenarley, Esq., (Peterhead, 1859), 10.

⁷³ Anon., *The Beggar’s Complaint*, (1812), 22.

⁷⁴ C.J. Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy and Beggars and Begging* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), 205, 214.

⁷⁵ “Wandering Mary,” *The New Myrtle and Vine; or, Complete Vocal library* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1806). On hedge-breaking as a legal offence see Neeson, *Commoners*, 279-80.

he did in so many of his early poems. He wrote the poem in 1798, the same year Nathaniel Bloomfield wrote "The Enclosure of Honington Green." The ballad is about a dispute between two neighbours concerning fuel. While in most of the ballads and poems we have seen villains were large landowners or landlords, here the offender who failed to share the land with his poor neighbours is an ordinary cattle dealer who also seems to own a farm. Goody Blake is very poor and Harry Gill appears to have a relatively comfortable lifestyle, but the two are not that far apart socially, except that he has access to the land (which he owns or rents) and she does not. The conflict between the two illustrates the kind of divisions that could happen within a community as a result of the loss of customary rights. The right to gather fuel is denied Goody Blake and she is compelled to pull sticks off Harry Gill's hedge to warm herself in winter. Harry Gill catches her in the act, angrily grabs her by the arms and shakes her violently. Goody's response to this assault is to curse Harry, asking God to ensure that he may never feel warm again. Goody's wish is granted and Harry shivers with cold, his teeth chattering for the rest of his days.

Wordsworth uses the youth of Harry, a "lusty drover," and Goody's frail old age to underline the latter's helplessness and the former's insensitivity:

Young Harry was a lusty drover,
 And who so stout of limb as he?
 His cheeks were red as ruddy clover;
 His voice was like the voice of three.
 Old Goody Blake was old and poor;
 Ill fed she was, and thinly clad;
 And any man who passed her door
 Might see how poor a hut she had.⁷⁶

Despite her old age, Goody works hard: she spins all day and does some other unspecified work for three hours every night. Despite all her efforts her earnings are not enough to pay for candles or fuel in winter. (All alone, she appears to have had no kin or friend to help her.) Like many of Wordsworth's poor, she has a gay, blithe spirit and in the summer can often be heard singing. But in winter the burden is too much to bear, except in the rare moments when she can find fuel:

O joy for her! Whene'er in winter
 The winds at night had made a rout;
 And scattered many a lusty splinter
 And many a rotten bough about,
 Yet never had she, well or sick,
 As every man who knew her says,
 A pile beforehand, turf or stick,
 Enough to warm her for three days.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ William Wordsworth, "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," in his *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), l. 17-24.

⁷⁷ Wordsworth, "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," l. 49-56.

So Goody's stealing from the hedge is a natural consequence of her situation. Wordsworth's intention for the story to serve as a warning to all farmers who denied the poor access to the riches of the land is made explicit in the last two lines:

Now think, ye farmers all, I pray,
Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill!⁷⁸

The lack of land access that made the poor resort to stealing fuel could also make them resort to poaching, particularly during a time of high prices. I have not been able to find popular ballads that speak about fuel disputes, but there are a number of songs in praise of poaching, though dating is hard as usual. Although game was not as great a necessity as fuel, the reason why poaching was condoned by landless labourers (in contrast to how it was seen by the elite) was a feeling that they should have some right to the fields and woods and that the game laws were unfair. Many ballads about poachers appear to be from the late nineteenth century but there are a few from the early 1800s. The "Bold Poacher" was printed in many versions under different names. The one used here is from the period 1780-1812. It tells the story of Lincolnshire poachers who catch a hare and sell it. Although the game keeper is aware of their trespass, he is too afraid to interfere.⁷⁹ In a version printed by Swindells, the game keeper is actually the one to buy the hare. The poachers and the game keeper collaborate against the landlord. The song ends with the lines

Here's to every poacher that lives in Lincolnshire,
And here's to every game-keeper that wants to buy a hare,
But not to every keeper that wants to keep his deer.⁸⁰

The trespasses of poachers were condoned by most peasants and agricultural labourers, as well as by those who supported them in the debate about custom. According to David Davies "To be a clever poacher is deemed a reputable accomplishment in the country; and therefore parents take care to instruct their children betimes in this art; which brings them on gradually to pilfering and stealing."⁸¹ Cobbett apparently invited labourers to steal fuel, to poach, and to avoid excisemen.⁸²

Songs were also written to commemorate the death of poachers during confrontations between game keepers. "Bill Brown" tells the story of the death of a young poacher during one of his nightly adventures near the town of Thirberg in 1769.⁸³ Though the details surrounding his death are unclear, the ballad was

⁷⁸ Wordsworth, "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," l. 127-8.

⁷⁹ "The Poacher" (London, J. Evans, 1780-1812), Bodleian Library, Harding B25(1508)

⁸⁰ "The Bold Poacher" (Manchester: Swindells, 1796-1853), Bodleian Library, Harding B 16(29b).

⁸¹ Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry* (1795), 59-60. On the widespread support for poaching in the countryside see Douglas Hay, "Poaching and the Game Laws on Cannock Chase," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 207-8.

⁸² William Cobbett, *Political Register* 22 (May, 1830), 667, Quoted in Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, 114.

⁸³ "Bill Brown" (Coppergate, York: C. Croshaw, 1814-1850), Bodleian Library, Harding B28(286).

reworked to commemorate the story of William Mays of Sudborough (Lincolnshire) who was killed during a fight between his poaching friends and a group of gamekeepers in 1837. Roy Palmer provides both the newspaper account and the ballad based on this event and it is noteworthy how the former was on the side of the keepers, referring to the poachers as “ruffians.” According to the newspaper account, the poachers outnumbered the keepers by 10 men and were the first to start the fight commencing “a ferocious attack on the keepers with bludgeons, long poles, and other weapons, beating them dreadfully.” The death of William Mays was described as an accident: “the deceased died from over-exertion,” no wounds were supposedly found upon the body. The keepers were said to have “used the greatest forbearance in this unequal conflict.”⁸⁴ The ballad, on the other hand, is completely on the side of the poachers: the fight is started by a keeper, John Millow, who shoots at the poachers from behind a tree. Mays is clearly killed by the keepers:

Then to engage the poachers,
The keepers they did start,
And so with strife took poor May's life
And stab'd him to the heart.

Mays is made more sympathetic by an allusion to his wife and children who have to live with his loss. His blood is said to cry for vengeance and he acquires the status of a hero:

Mourn all you gallant poachers, mourn
Poor May's [sic.] is dead and gone,
An hero brave laid in his grave,
As ever the sun shine on.⁸⁵

There may not have been as many poems and songs against enclosure as there were about agricultural labour or social relations, but the ones that exist were written with passion and conviction. By way of conclusion I would like to look at a couple of passages written by supporters of enclosure and show how they were pervaded by the language and ideas found in the writings of poets who opposed enclosure. Although the speaker or writer intended a pro-enclosure message, some of the language and imagery employed undermined the argument. Henry Brougham's speech to parliament is a good example of this. Although given in 1816 the speech does not discuss the rural disturbances happening in East Anglia at this time. Brougham admitted enclosure had happened too fast in order to produce enough food during a time of war. However, he felt it was an inevitable process and its overall effects were beneficial. Yet the following quotation has the disturbing effect of suggesting overuse and abuse of the land:

⁸⁴ The newspaper account is from the *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, quoted in the *Northampton Mercury*, 21st January, 1837. Cited in Palmer, *A Ballad History of England*, 112-113.

⁸⁵ “Sudborough Heroes,” in Palmer, *A Ballad History of England*, 112-13.

not only have even the most inconsiderable commons, the very village greens, and the little stripes of sward by the way-side, been in many places subjected to division and exclusive ownership, and cut up into corn-fields in the rage for farming; not only have stubborn soils been forced to bear crops by mere weight of metal, by sinking money in the earth, as it has been called—but the land that formerly grew something has been fatigued with labour, and loaded with capital, until it yielded much more.⁸⁶

Brougham believed this had made England the greatest agricultural state in the world but the language was one of violence and of rape and it ruined the author's argument that enclosure was good for the country. A similar passage, describing a place called Bromley common and used to support the argument that the commons were unproductive also deconstructs itself:

Several cottages are scattered around the common, which have a pleasing effect in relieving the eye while contemplating this extensive waste. Here the botanist may find every species of heath which his kingdom produces; the gravelly nature of the soil scarcely admitting of the growth of any thing except this plant, a dwarf furze, and rushes. In the summer months, when the former of these are in bloom, the appearance of the common is extremely beautiful; but it cannot fail of producing regret in the mind of the spectator, that so large a tract of land is unproductive.⁸⁷

The irregularity of the common, which we saw praised in verse, the variety of species growing on it, and the beauty of the wild flowers do not sound like things that would produce “regret” in the mind of the spectator. In fact “regret” for the loss of common fields appears to be a feeling suppressed by these two authors who wanted to make enclosure look like a public good. Although they were on the losing side, the poems and songs against enclosure written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made use of powerful imagery and rhetoric. They show a consciousness of being wronged on the part of writers and readers that may have been more widely shared than it would appear at first.

⁸⁶ Speech of Henry Brougham, Esq. M.P. on Tuesday, the 9th of April, 1816; in the Committee of the Whole House, upon the State of the Agricultural Distresses (London, 1816), 15.

⁸⁷ John Dunin, *Outlines of the History and Antiquities of Bromley, in Kent* (Bromley, 1815), 43.